What is school for?

In a new german book, educationalists from the University of Jena put the system of schools to the test. In their contributions, they analyse various dimensions of meaning of the institution, shed more light on matters that appear to be self-evident and investigate the question: ‘What is the school actually for?’

Whereas some countries ‘simply’ have compulsory education, other states such as Germany rely for the education of children and young people on the legal requirement to attend the publicly recognised institution that is ‘the school’. In view of this clear definition, it is surprising that although schools are regularly discussed in connection with the results of new studies, performance assessments and arguments about political responsibilities, the system as a whole is rarely questioned. Educationalists at Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany have now done just that in a new book entitled ‘System Schule auf dem Prüfstand’ (School as a system under scrutiny). In their contributions, they analyse various dimensions of meaning of the institution, shed more light on matters that appear to be self-evident and investigate the question: ‘What is the school actually for?’

School students should fit into society

“At first glance, the institution of the school has one main goal: at the end of their schooldays, pupils should fit into society,“ says Ralf Koerrenz of the University of Jena, who published the book together with his colleague Nils Berkemeyer. “A school qualification equips them with job-oriented competences, with which they can ensure the further economic development of society. At the same time, in school, pupils are given the tools to integrate into the culture that surrounds them.” Accordingly, much of the current discussion on this subject has been mainly concerned with how individual jobs can be performed better. For example, due to a shortage of skilled workers, policymakers for the German economy are calling for a strengthening of the MINT (Mathematics, Information technology, Natural sciences and Technology) subjects in school.

Fairness as the standard

However, the contributions to this book propose that, rather than making a few minor adjustments, we should see the institution as a whole as being open to change. “School is part of a social system in which the individual’s claim to education and well-being have to be brought into a practical balance with the state’s demand for social conditions to be reproduced and changed within views of reform,“ says Koerrenz. The institution as such is fundamentally conservative, but this does not mean that as a system, it offers no possible alternatives.

It is important to Nils Berkemeyer, however, that with all the potential for change, one thing has to be guaranteed: the school in a democracy must ensure equality of opportunities for every child and must not contribute toward strengthening social inequality. “Fairness must be the central point of reference in the discussion about the school and its position in – and in relation to – society,” he stresses.
‘Bildung: Democracy’

For this reason, another contribution interprets the trend to more private schools, especially primary schools, as an example of the way in which social division in the field of education is actually being promoted. Other authors take up ideas of famous school theorists, such as Johann Friedrich Herbart, when analysing the potential for change; they present model projects for schools and report on practical international experiences. Before she came to Friedrich Schiller University, Hazel Slinn, for instance, worked as a teacher in Kosovo and Poland, and was involved in processes of change in education in those countries.

The book is also the first in the new series ‘Bildung: Democracy’. With this series, researchers – as part of the research and development project ‘Getting it right from the beginning. Teacher Professionalization in the Jena Model of Teacher Education’ – are turning their attention to the school as an institution within a democratic society. In this book and in further volumes, the Jena educationalists want to discuss how educational processes influence democracy and, in turn, which spaces and opportunities democracy opens up for education and related institutions.

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